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ABSTRACT

Colonial printers were more or less forced to take sides during the Revolutionary era. As they did so, their social status changed from that akin to mechanics to that of spokespersons of a social movement. From this time on, the gradual separation of editor from printer formed a social basis for defining a journalist's tasks as editorial, not production. The position now known as copy editor emerged after the Civil War, as newspapers' growth led to a more complex division of newsroom labor. This process continued into the 20th century, with the copy editor becoming increasingly more removed from the processes of gathering and writing the news. At the same time, the reporter's social status began to rise. As a result of these two trends, the copy editor's status declined markedly. (Fifty-eight references are appended.) (Author)

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Tasks and Status: Newspaper Copy Editing and the Division of Newsroom Labor

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Tasks and Status: Newspaper Copy Editing and the Division of Newsroom Labor

Colonial printers were more or less forced to take sides during the Revolutionary era. As they did so, their social status changed from that akin to mechanics to that of spokesperson of a social movement.

From this time on, the gradual separation of editor from printer formed a social basis for defining a journalist's tasks as editorial, not production.

The position now known as copy editor emerged after the Civil War, as newspapers' growth led to a more complex division of newsroom labor. This process continued into the 20th century, with the copy editor becoming increasingly more removed from the processes of gathering and writing the news.

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Tasks and Status: Newspaper Copy Editing and the Division of Newsroom Labor

As a rule, thoroughly competent printers have better judgment and more discriminating newspaper tact than editors manufactured out of collegiate graduates.

. . .I have known owners of journals to run from one end of the country to the other in a vain search for a competent Managing Editor, when little fellows setting type in their own offices were fully able and competent to get out just such newspapers as were wanted. . . .

These words were written by Amos J. Cummings, city editor of the New York *Tribune*, in 1869. The quote is a suggestive one, for it alludes to a division of labor, and of status, that has long been prevalent in U.S. journalism.

Newspaper production -- e.g., typesetting or paperhandling -- is seen as blue collar work. Such workers are not considered journalists; their skills are viewed as primarily physical.

Newsroom laborers are white collar workers. Newsroom managers supervise not only the editorial tasks but, ultimately and traditionally, the production processes as well.

Why is one sort of work valued more highly than another? Becker (1982:1) quotes Anthony Trollope's description of rising at dawn to write, before going off to work at the post office. Trollope was awoken and

served coffee by an old groom, who was always punctual: "I do not know that I ought not to feel that I owe more to him than to any one else for the success I have had."

Becker's point is that art work, like most kinds of work, is in fact collective behavior -- and that dividing up the credit is an arbitrary activity.

Further, the total amount of credit available -- the social status of a particular sort of work -- may vary over time and from one society to another. Starr (l978:177), for example, notes that in the 19th century United States, medicine "occupied an inferior place among the professions," and that today Soviet physicians earn "less than three-quarters of the average industrial wage."

So, if putting out a newspaper is seen as collective behavior, then the differences cited by Cummings may be taken as topics for study.

This paper focuses on the origins and development of a particular form of newsroom work: that of the copy editor.

Like newspaper production work, copy editing receives little recognition among journalists and none from the public. This job is demanding yet anonymous: It means doing precise work under deadline pressure, without the gratification of seeing one's name in print.

I am concerned with how and why such a division of newsroom labor

should occur. In so doing, I examine accompanying changes in journalism's social status.

My goal is to situate the origins and development of copy editing within changes in the newspaper's social role, and to link such changes to societal changes.

Tasks and Status

A consideration of early American journalism and its social status involves a focus on newspapers' social role and their division of labor.

In colonial society, there seldom was a distinction between editor and printer (Mott, 1962:162). Yet changes in status did occur.

Status, or social honor, may be seen as a "social category," something that brings with it "rights and duties (Hughes, 1984:132)." Status also may be seen as a system of ranking people, i.e., as a hierarchy of honor.

A claim to a certain social status may be based on any number of things, e.g., birth, talent, occupation (Hughes, 1984:222). Parkin (1971:25) suggests that in Western capitalist societies, the status hierarchy is based predominantly on occupation, with a sharp break between "manual and non-manual" labor.

The number of statuses and status-determining characteristics in Colonial society is unclear. But it is quite clear that Colonial printers seldom had high status in their communities (Botein, 1975:157-160). There was a tendency to view them as mechanics, i.e., as manual laborers, rather than as intellectuals or scholars.

To avoid poverty, many printers also acted as merchants, selling

paper, coffee, clothing or even real estate. To help improve their business visibility -- as much as to inform the public -- printers often put out a newspaper. In so doing, most strove to avoid controversy, as a business strategy for giving the least offense (Botein, 1975). Such caution also helped to avoid legal problems with the authorities.

Yet this approach may have hurt the printers' status. Societies have long valued literacy and knowledge, and the possessors of same.1 By not articulating their views in print, colonial printers may have passed by a path to more social honor. . .not that they necessarily sought same.

With the rise of revolutionary sentiments, however, most printers were forced to take sides (Botein, 1975). Ironically, it was this largely unsought partisanship that brought them some reknown.

Thus it was a change in editorial content -- and not a separation of editorial tasks from production tasks -- that brought some Revolutionary era printers an increase in social status.

1. Ong (1982:93) notes that many primarily oral cultures at first regarded writing "as an instrument of secret and magic power." Similarly, Ladurie (1978:240) notes that in an early 14th century French village, "books only appeared. . .in order to be placed for a few minutes on the head of someone dying."

This raises two points. First, it represents one influence toward separating editorial work from production work. After all, were such a separation to become economically feasible -- were one not to need rely on job printing for sustenance -- would it not seem attractive to enjoy a higher status while avoiding dirtying one's hands?

Second, it suggests an emerging social basis for defining what a journalist must do to be considered a journalist, i.e., the "irreducible core (Becker, 1982:19; Bucher and Strauss, 1961:328)" of such work.

Rise of the editor

The separation of editorial tasks from production tasks did not start to take hold until the end of the 18th century. Mott (1962:162) notes that until roughly 1800, there seldom was a distinction between a newspaper's editor and its printer (also see Schlesinger, 1958:60).

During the Revolutionary era, some newspapers were put out by groups of patriots. This appearance of editorial collectives fostered the concept of editorial tasks' being done by a separate person or persons than the production tasks.

This approach was developed further in the Federalist era, with the creation of a party press. John Fenno, of the *Gazette of the United States*, "established his reputation as a journalist without benefit of mechanical apprenticeship (Emery and Emery, 1984: 93,94)." The same could be said of his rival, Philip Freneau of the *National Gazette*.

From the Colonial to Federalist eras, changes in the newspaper's social role encouraged both status distinctions within newspaper work, and an emerging definition of journalism's "core activities (Becker, 1982:16)" as editorial tasks, not production tasks.

Yet such changes did not occur quickly or completely. The country weekly was by far the most common newspaper of the Federalist era (de

Tocqueville, 1945:193,194). It usually was a modest enterprise, with a printer/editor who had trouble cajoling readers into paying their subscriptions. "Subsisting by a country newspaper," wrote a New Jersey editor in 1802, "is generally little better than starving (quoted in Leonard, 1988:55)."

In the Jacksonian era, the second party system integrated newspapers more thoroughly into the country's political structure. The evolution of a political "loyal opposition" encouraged the promotion of self-interest through newspapers.

As a result, the country weekly was increasingly likely to be run by an editor with political affiliations and ambitions. Often this editor had prestige prior to, and outside, his newspaper career (Smith, 1977).

Further, with the rise of what Schudson (1978:30) terms a "democratic market society," the metaphor of the marketplace entered the political discourse. The country weekly's ideology of impartiality, or "rational liberty (Nerone, 1987:390)," gave way to an emphasis on competition and partisanship.2 Increasingly, ideas and people were to compete as though they were commodities.

2. Smith (1977) documents the extent to which newspapers competed for government printing contracts, and the effect that this had on newspaper partisanship.

These shifts nurtured the notion of running a newspaper strictly for profit. Newspapers became more competitive and commercial, and there was a concurrent increase in their number, from 200 in 1801 to 1,200 in 1833 (Lee, 1937:718; Mott, 1962:95,113; Hofstadter et al, 1957:252).

These changes encouraged within the country weekly a process -- the separation of editorial tasks from production tasks -- that already was occurring in other classes of newspapers.

The penny press, then, did not wholly transform journalism practices and policies. Rather, it strengthened existing trends (Nerone, 1987). Increasingly, printer and editor became separate positions, as when three printers founded the New York *Transcript* and hired an editor (Bleyer, 1927:165; Mott, 1962:228).

For the Federalist era party papers, the mercantilist papers, in time the country weeklies, and from its start the penny press, it is the editor who often had the most social prominence. Printers, occasional correspondents, givers of support, financial or otherwise -- none had the same recognition.

In effect, from roughly 1800 until at least the 1850s constituted a "golden age of the editor." With the prominence of editorials over news stories, a newspaper tended to be the voice of its editor.

This era of "personal journalism (Mott, 1962:312)" helped solidify the distinction between editor and printer. It reinforced the social prominence of the former over the latter. And it strengthened the definition of a journalist's "core activities" as editorial, not production.

Copy Editing

Distinctions between journalist and printer were followed by divisions of labor within journalism. By the 1850s, increasing "financial stability (Lee, 1937:614)" brought a growth in newsroom staffs.

The evolution of the position of city editor marked a major step in the development of a formal system for gathering local news. It also marked a major step in the division of newsroom labor. No longer called a "chief reporter," the city editor hired and directed the reporting staff.

While the penny press helped sharpen the distinction between reporter and editor (Nerone, 1987:397,398), the Mexican War and the Civil War supplied impetus for more systematic newsgathering, causing newspapers to add more correspondents.

Hughes (1984:292, 313) suggests that any job can be said to consist of a "bundle of tasks": "The thing that holds them together is that they are all done by one person and under a single name " As newspapers did more newsgathering, as they grew in size, the bundle of editorial tasks became increasingly split up.

More reporters meant more editors: The division of newsroom labor became more complex. By 1868, the New York *Tribune* had a managing editor, a city editor, an assistant city editor, a foreign editor, a night editor, an agricultural editor, a dramatic editor, and a book review editor -- in addition to 32 reporters and Horace Greeley (Cummings, 1868b:105-107).

After the Civil War, as a part of this increasing division of newsroom labor, copy editing evolved as a separate work position. At first it was not called by this name; the bundle of tasks today associated with this job emerged before the job title did.

In fact, several parallel identifications existed. One finds reference to the copy editor's tasks under several different titles: night editor, night city editor, etc.

Cummings (1868b:108,109) describes an editorial meeting as including a night editor, who in effect served as city editor during late night hours. But Cummings also mentions another night editor:

> At the desk near the door we find Dr. John B. Wood, the Night Editor, through whose hands passes all the telegraph and news matter. . . .The Doctor prides himself as a thorough grammarian, and his brilliant feats with the blue pencil have frequently gashed long reports and letters to the consternation of their authors. . . .Every bit of copy is carefully revised in his hands, and from him goes up stairs to the compositors in ship-shape.

Plainly, this bundle of tasks is that of the copy editor. When Will Irwin (1911b:35) praises Selah M. Clarke's skills at copy editing, he refers

to Clarke as the night city editor of the New York *Sun*. Similarly, in his biography of the *Sun*, O'Brien (1918:35) also refers to Clarke by this title, but the section of the chapter that focuses on him is titled "Clarke, Magician of the Copy Desk."

The division of newsroom labor had reached a point where the city editor's bundle of tasks no longer included the final editing of copy. By the close of the Civil War, the largest dailies' newsroom staffs simply were becoming too large for the city editor to both supervise reporters and do all the editing of their copy.

As this situation emerged, the bundle of tasks now associated with copy editing -- writing headlines and editing copy -- evolved as a separate work position. For instance, Shanks (1867:52) notes that in addition to the European Editor and the Exchanges Editor,

> in the larger (newspaper's) office, like that of the *Herald*, the duty of editing the 'home correspondence' devolves upon another than the 'Exchange Editor,' no proper or distinctive title applying to him.

This was the work position that came to be known as copy editor.

Both the copy editor's bundle of tasks and position in the newsroom's hierarchy changed over time. In some cases, the position first was referred to as night editor.

But as newsroom staffs continued to grow, one night editor was not sufficient. The tendency then became for this position to be considered as

an assistant of the city editor. With this change came the name of copy editor, or, at first, copy reader.

From the 1870s comes one of the earliest references to "copy editing." Describing the strict standards for writing that he learned as a novice reporter for the New York *Tribune*, Julius Chambers (1922:7) writes,

> Facts; facts; nothing but facts. . . .The index of forbidden words was very lengthy, and misuse of them, when they escaped the keen eye of a copy-reader and got into print, was punishable by suspension without pay for a week, or immediate discharge.

Since Chambers was describing his "merciless training" under the city editor, it is reasonable to conclude that these copy editors worked with the city editor. In a similar vein, an early journalism text (Hyde, 1925:25) says that

> the copyreader works directly under the charge of the city editor. . . . He is, in fact, the assistant of the city editor and his office grew out of the overcrowding of that dignitary's duties.
>
> When a copyreader is added to the staff, he simply takes over a portion of the city editor's work -- that of editing copy and writing headlines.

Copy editing as a distinct work position appears to have become common to newspapers by the 1890s. An article in the March 1891 issue of The Journalist, discussing some reporters' poor attempts at humor, notes that "there is nothing that the average copy reader dreads so much as the alleged humorist (1891:12)."

That the copy editor had become an established part of the newsroom is suggested by the opening line of an August 1919 editorial in the New Republic, concerning newspaper newsroom workers' first attempt to form a union: "From Copy Readers to Leg Men to Chief Editorial Writers, they have organized in Boston (1919:8)."

Thus the work position of copy editor evolved from that of city editor. The creation of both these positions reflects a continuing process toward a more complex division of newsroom labor. As a result, desk jobs in particular became more compartmentalized -- each job's bundle of tasks grew more narrow.

Status of Copy Editing

At first glance, journalists' attitudes toward copy editing work seem to be almost uniformly negative. In a 1911 essay, Will Irwin lauds Selah M. Clarke as having "put genius into the ungrateful task of copy-reading (Irwin, 1911b:35)."

Writing in Editor & Publisher in 1923, a copy editor laments that "the copy desk is commonly held in scorn by the star reporters" and most other editors (Welsh, 1923:12). Recalling the early 1960s at the New York *Times*, a former reporter notes that, concerning the copy desk, he was advised, "The game is to sneak some color or interpretation past that line of humorless zombies (Darnton, 1975:180)."

Many other examples could be cited, all from journalists. To the public, the copy editor has always been invisible. Both points need explanation.

As the division of newsroom labor increased, the copy editor gradually became more removed from the status and authority of the city editor. At first, those tasks not retained by the city editor tended to fall to the night editor.

For example, O'Brien (1918:381-3) relates that Clarke actually told reporters how to write their stories. Clarke also had the authority to decide whether or not to print a story.

It is likely that a similar situation then obtained at many if not most large dailies. Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr. (1922:4), describing his days as a cub reporter at the New York *Herald* in the early 1900s, described the copy editor as "the biggest Roman of them all, for he is the fellow who 'trims' your copy." At a time when many reporters were paid by the word, this was no small authority.

Similarly, a copy editor recalls the work's status at the end of the century:

> The old Philadelphia Press. . .was a great training school for copyreaders. There the desk was given its proper dignity.
>
> A reporter would no more have thought of going up to the Press copy desk and helping himself to shears or pastepot than he would have thought of walking clear to Broad street, six or seven blocks, to cash his pay order with a perfectly obliging saloonkeeper right across the street. No, indeed, that was a COPY DESK.
>
> Not often did a reporter reach that eminence in which he dared to approach the desk at all without being summoned. Reporters that did that were among the elite (Welsh, 1923:12).

Thus, initially, copy editors enjoyed considerable authority and status within the newsroom. Yet the same process which created the job, in time took away most of its authority and status.

As part of the country's post-Civil War economic growth (Kennedy, 1987:242,243), the late 19th century saw the rise of standardized national brands. Such firms used advertising to create a need for their products:

From 1879 to 1909, the proportion of their revenues that newspapers and periodicals received from advertising rose from 44 percent to 60 percent (Lee, 1937:324.)

This made it far more expensive to start a newspaper -- "Ads swelled the size of the paper each day, requiring larger plants, more paper and ink, and bigger staffs (Bagdikian, 1987:176.)"

Further, such growth caused the division of newsroom labor to become more complex. After the turn of the century, it became increasingly common for the copy editor to work directly for the city editor or the telegraph editor, as an assistant (Radder, 1924:3).

This was because each stage of the editing process -- assigning a story, reviewing it with a reporter, accepting or rejecting it, deciding on page placement -- was becoming more distinctly the bundle of tasks of a specific newsroom work position.

No longer did the night editor, increasingly called a copy reader, have all the tasks and authority not retained by the city editor.

After World War I, most larger dailies came to group all their copy readers at a separate "copy desk," with its own head copy reader, or "slotman (Bleyer, 1913:258,259; Bleyer, 1932:376,377)."

This evolution of a separate copy desk was a basis of the copy editor's decline in status. The copy editor's authority and status now

derived from the slotman, who typically had no part in the other phases of the editing process.

Further, the copy editor's bundle of tasks was becoming narrowed, largely to writing headlines and catching mistakes not caught in any of the prior stages of the editing process. And there remained the usual conflicts with reporters whose copy was being edited.

In effect, the work position of copy editor became increasingly removed from the processes of gathering and writing the news.

At the same time, the reporter's star was on the rise. Until the late 19th century, the newspaper reporter usually received little public recognition. Further, roughly from the Civil War to the turn of the century, many were paid according to a "space and time" system, a journalistic version of piece-work (Smythe, 1980:2; Cummings, 1868b:106).

Although newspaper managements typically deprecated their reporters, by the late 19th century, social currents were working on the reporter's behalf. The focus of U.S. daily newspapers had changed from editorials to news reporting (Godkin, 1890:197,198; Lee, 1937:629).

An emphasis on news does not necessarily benefit reporters more than editors. But Hofstadter (1955:190) contends that, starting in the 1890s, a reformist impulse in U.S. political culture brought a heightened "concern with news, interviews, exposure (of corruption), and human

interest," which in turn "set a premium on the good reporter."

The advent in the 1890s of popular magazines, "newspapers in periodical form (Hofstadter, 1955:192)," heightened public awareness of the reporter, since initially many of these magazines featured muckrakers such as Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair.

After World War I, the use of bylines further aided the reporter's status, inside and outside the newsroom. Used during the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, they became quite common by the 1930s. This, Schudson (1978:145) suggests, "gave the reporter greater authority in relation to the copy desk."

Similarly, Turner Catledge (1971:165) recalls that in 1922, copy editors were

> the aristocrats of the newsroom. They made more money and worked more regular hours than reporters, and were more highly valued by most executives.
>
> The shift in status came with the proliferation of by-lines in the late thirties. The by-line gave the reporter increased prestige. He became a star and could command a greater salary.

While the reporter's stature within the newsroom was growing, then, the copy editor was becoming more removed from the processes of gathering and writing the news. And the reporter was gaining public recognition, something the copy editor had never had.

The rise of specialization and interpretive reporting in the 1930s (Schudson, 1978:145) also helped the reporter's status, inside and outside the newsroom. As newspapers expanded their concept of news, the concept

of general assignment reporter was supplemented by that of the specialist, or "beat" reporter.

It had long been common practice for copy desks to have specialists, with the copy divided accordingly (Welsh, 1923:12; Radder, 1924:3). But as the number of specialties grew, newspaper managers were confronted with a logistical problem, in that reporters substantially outnumber copy editors. This encouraged the "universal desk" system, in which all copy editors were expected to be generalists.

Thus the copy editor was denied specialist status, while the reporter increasingly was granted the same.

Hughes (1984:293) suggests that within any occupation's bundle of tasks,

> some one activity may be symbolically valued beyond its importance in the present complex of activities. Changes in technology, economics, and organization may change the balance between the named symbolic activity and others.

In effect, social change influenced the shape and status of copy editing's bundle of tasks. Gradually, the bundle was narrowed, with the remaining tasks having less status and authority than the ones taken off.

The work began as roughly a nighttime equivalent of the city editor. Then it became an assistant to the city editor, and later to the telegraph editor. Still later it had become separated wholly from the processes of gathering and writing the news: It had become, and it remains, the last step in a number of phases of editing.

Conclusion

I have used copy editing's origins and development as a means for examining changes in the division of newsroom labor in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This division was driven largely by external forces, by economic and political change.

Yet I do not mean to imply that, consequently, newspaper content simply reflected society, or "mirrored reality." I do mean to say that, as newspapers developed as for-profit organizations within a developing capitalist society, the consequent statuses of various newspaper tasks reflected that society's developing bases for assigning social honor or status.

There is a parallel with British printing. In its first years, 1557-1567, the Stationers Company was controlled by importers and stationers -- i.e., merchants. Soon the printers took power -- the basis for political power being no longer the ability to supply formerly scarce paper, but the possession of a legal license to operate a printing press.

By 1600, this, too, had begun to change. Power now accrued to those who owned book patents:

> The printers' loss of their power, like their acquisition of it, was a consequence of the economic realities of the trade. . . .The Company (book patent) licenses allowed those who were not printers to accumulate a form of capital as important as printing equipment or the office of Master Printer, for the copy-owners held the rights in the copies which the public actually wanted to buy (Feather, 1988:39).

Such copy-owners usually were booksellers -- they simply contracted with a printer. Hence the printers' loss of economic and political power meant a loss of social status.

By 1800, then, when various classes of U.S. newspapers had begun to contract with a printer, there was a precedent. Hence the roots of the prejudice that Amos Cummings described in 1869.

While Parkin's (1971:25) distinction between manual and non-manual labor is instructive, it cannot account for all cultural bases for bestowing social honor. The striving to gain, or at least retain, social status is a recurring theme in U.S. history. Examples are Hofstadter's (1955) "status revolution" among late 19th century Progressives and Mills' (1951) "status panic" among mid-20th century white collar workers.
In both cases, concern about images of self-worth occurred within classes that did not engage in manual labor.

The issue here, then, is not, why was there a division of newsroom labor? Rather, it is, why did this process take the form that it did?

Newspapers rarely have been run as democracies: As newsroom staffs grew, managements likely sought a means to maintain the concentration of power within a relatively few positions. So, if more reporters meant more copy editors, then best to place the copy editors elsewhere and vest their authority and status in an assistant or two to the city editor.

There may be safety in numbers: But for the copy editor, numbers brought a job reclassification, from manager to worker.

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